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A Story For Every Category IV : Fantasy



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Chapter 1 by intellikat

Autumn came upon the land like the bear coming over the mountain: lumbering and heavy in its great earthen tones with a melancholic lethargy punctuated in stark moments by howl and groan.

Far beyond the protected city walls of Cromenthryn, farmers had been watching the animal's approach with keen eyes, and were daily packing the last of their crop-seed into pitted earth to prepare for the dormant months ahead. Fishermen yet trolled the wide streams that cut through the richly soiled crop-land, sharing field with farmer to fill winter larders. Mighty waterwheels churned in the chilly currents where fishermen's lures did lie, their movement powering great turbines built by engineers and woodsmen to grind the season's grain to useable flour. The plodding woodsmen themselves were now amidst the weald, their sturdy blades felling fresh lumber for saw mills driven too by the waterwheel. The raw ore smelted and beaten into the woodsman's axe and the farmer's spade and gently curved into the fisherman's sharp lure was being drawn in dirty heaps from the ancient mountains beyond by men of the mines and trundled upon heavy carts by beasts of burden; songs as old as the hills accompanying the arduous task

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purveyors alike flowed ceaselessly through these dusty veins, pumping life and vitality to the inhabitants and culture within.

On this particular autumn day, one of the carts being drawn into the city was pulled by a cheery grain farmer by the name of Tolka Thornbustle. Like many others of his trade, Tolka harvested his spring grain in a modest field allotted by the Prince and flailed the gathered stooks at the cooperative threshing house floor. Over the preceding months, Tolka and his apprentices had worked diligently to press the dried grain into use at the millstone, providing fine new flour for the many months to come. His wooden cart was now filled to overflowing with the bulging sacks of flour produced, and as the morning suns rose to gently touch the tawny hues of the land, his hand was at the cart to sell, to sell at market; and with every measured step along the causeway he drew closer and closer to that destination. Many of the other grain farmers sold their loads in bulk to grossers within the city and were done with the business, but Tolka preferred the open bartering of the cobbled market floor and for as long as he had been at his business the scores of acquainted bakers and husswives who came to him to buy seemed to prefer this way as well.

High above him amidst the windy gusts of Fall, sentries stalked the length of the city walls scanning the awakened horizon and the stream of scattered men and animals below. A lone, steeled soldier peered down on Tolka with watchful eye, a deep scar running along the side of his neck as an ominous reminder of days not so prosperous or safe as these. Tolka returned his gaze to the looming gates ahead and forced his way against the thickening glut of bodies about him. The familiar sounds of wheel and hoof filled the brisk and busy hours of early morn as he passed between the open gates of Cromenthyrn.

Paved stones, repaved over the many years met Tolka's feet in the wide way as he crossed o'er the threshold of the city and directed his load toward the central market and fountains. Here, he would prop his cart and sell the whole of his lot hopefully by day's end. A flash of color caught Tolka's eye as a young boy scurried by, and for a brief moment Tolka thought it might have been the eminent scholar Puglot the Half-height, late to an early morning intellectual tilt.

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liquids and leaves all bottled and boxed in exotic colors to those who suffered in mind, body, or spirit. Though magicks had been banned upon punishment by death since the Great War, some of the old lore occasionally reappeared in the feeble marketing ploys of medicine men while a great deal of the former magickate language itself could still be found on various herbal packagings and in the calls-out by merchants whose speeches at times rivaled the eloquence of the city's best philosophers. "Upon thy brow do rest the root/of gander-sickle and cametuck shoot," a seller would call out from his stall, "Incant the text with bold incline/And all thy fears shall soon decline!" Gander-sickle and cametuck were both primary elements in the olden magickate spells, and "to incline" was a term which referred to bending the powers of spirit toward accomplishing a magickal task. "Incliner" was a title synonymous with "Magickate," and had turned to a pejorative in years following the war. Considering such rants of merchant and philosopher alike, the old farmer knew that by late hours of morning the marketplace would be full of all kinds of curious, and to his plain ears, nonsensical speech.

Tolka's natty whiskers twitched beneath his large straw hat and he quickly brushed the brim back with a hand, halting the cart mid-stone for a resting moment. His eyes fell upon the ruins to his right of the Cathedral of St. Lufinus, a foreboding structure despite the fact that there was nothing left for it to forebode. The large edifice had once been the last hold-out for a band of powerful magickates during the final battle for control of the city, and in the end the Prince had demolished the entire structure and defeated the rebels within by means of explosives and artillery. The ruins, like those beyond the city walls, had not yet been razed and rebuilt into anything new or useful for the inhabitants, though its continued presence had provided the children with a limitless supply of ghost stories. Tolka took to the cart once again, his eyes drifting across the centerpiece of the cathedral's high architecture: a sculpted image of the dark Wizard himself, shattered through the visage so that no one would have known who it was save in extant memory of the original form. Truly, many of the young ones had no knowledge of who the figure was, nor of what purpose the cathedral had ever served: and this was no doubt exactly what the Prince had intended.

The low bells were ringing out now from the High Court and the Halls of Rule where morning

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which also was the holder of all city loans enabling new businesses to be birthed. This body had been the first to rise from the ashes of the Great War under the Prince's new administration, and had set itself about the task of restructuring the financial policies and systems of the land in order to pave the way for a post-magick economy and the expected prosperity derived from it. By all accounts, it had succeeded wildly: in less than 30 years the country had risen from nearly complete devastation to a thriving and interdependent society where tradesmen like Tolka were able to compete in an open marketplace and provide for their family's future. As everyone remembered it, the years before the Prince's rule had been dark days of oppression and slavery where magickates and the Wizard behind them had kept the people in ignorance to better their own states indefinitely. With the fall of the Wizard's dictatorship, the future had opened up with possibilities.

The fountains splashed joyfully in the early light, and Tolka set his cart down at a vacant spot near one commemorating the institution of the mind-shape: the city's education system under the Prince's government. At the very highest point of the fountain's sculpted design were a man and woman holding aloft a tiny child who appeared to be taking flight. "Knowledge Enables Progress" was the loose and rather flat translation of the Elderspeak script chiseled in relief below, followed by the state motto, "For Prince and Princedom." Real flesh and blood children were at the edge of the fountain already, splashing and playing even in the chill of the early morning. Others were scurrying about the streets on this week's end; life, good life flowing through their veins as they chased after one another like wind-blown swirls of fallen leaves. Mind-shaping would halt in the coming winter months and the children of the land would then be spending their days helping their own households in the exercise of various trades. From parent to child the trades and businesses were passed along in this way, just as Tolka had done with his own son, now fully grown.

Chocking the cart's large wheels, he noticed one young boy with a shock of blonde hair watching him intently from the fountain's edge. Tolka drew back the cloth covering his load and began to set his bags of flour in order.

"Hallo there, young lad. How might you be this morning?"

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"I don't have a mother," said the boy.

Tolka's posture softened. "I'm sorry to hear that, me child. Is it just you and your father, then?"

"I live with my Uncle and Aunt, in Wendborough."

Tolka frowned. "You're a ways from home. What might you be doing here in Cromenthyrn?"

"We're visiting. For the week's end. My uncle has business in court."

Tolka looked into the boy's deep blue eyes and smiled. If his uncle was taking up matters in court from as far as Wendborough, it probably didn't mean anything good. It was rare that outer-folk spent much time in Cromenthyrn, and it was quite easy for them to be taken advantage of during what stay they made.

"What's your name then, young lad?"

"Andryk, sir. Andryk Eldermeier."

"Well, Andryk Eldermeier, take this bag of flour to you's uncle. Tell himself that you are both ever welcome to the city and many wishes to your health." The boy took the small bag of flour into his open hands with great care. "You won't find this kind back where you be from. I'm sure it will make you some fine meal in the days to come."

He winked at the boy, and most likely out of some kind of embarrassment the boy scampered off without another word. When Tolka rose to his own height and turned back to his cart, a tall man of the city stood before him: a baker, and a friend.

"Adelwyn Ganderbout!" cried Tolka cheerily, latching onto the baker's shoulder with one hand and his outstretched palm with the other. "Me young friend! Me thought you'd begun to buy from that old chaff-dealer Soryn these days. How's yourself? And you's wife?"

The baker received Tolka's enthusiasm with pleasure. "Just fine, my friend, by the Prince's good graces, just fine. My wife is well, too. Tending to be shop as we speak, she is."

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Tolka hefted two larger sacks of flour onto the small hand-cart that Adelwyn had brought along with him as the baker sorted through his purse for payment.

“Oil’s up in price, you know.” Said Adelwyn, handing over the coins. “Makes for harder business these days.”

“Good thing me asking prices are still so low,” said Tolka, winking. Two laughing children ran by and Tolka watched his friend turn to see them go. “When will you be starting a family of you’s own, then, say?” he asked after a moment, drawing Adelwyn’s focus back. “I’d joy to see the offspring of the likes o’ yourself and Jerusha. Mighty fine stock, y’are, m’boy.”

Adelwyn sighed. “‘Tisn’t up to me, m’friend. We’d like that very much, though, we would. Business must pick up, pick up, however. Must pick up.”

Tolka saw a twitch of something sad in his friend’s eye, and without a thought he dropped a third but smaller sack onto the baker’s hand-cart. “Give you’s wife me best.”

“You’re a good man, Tolka Thornbustle.”

“Go in the name of the Prince, me friend.”

“Remain in him, yourself, I say,” replied the baker, and turned to go.

The whole load of wares Adelwyn Ganderbout had collected from the morning was now wheeled with care and confidence under his strong forearms. The young baker had worked tirelessly to build his bakeshop up from nothing over the first years, and was now quite proud of the modest provision it made for himself and his wife Jerusha. The couple had been introduced through their families and after a relatively short period of courtship, had married. They now lived comfortably in the cozy loft above the bakery, Adelwyn having purchased the entire building after two years of working from the storefront below. The two had not been able to conceive a child in their three years of otherwise happy marriage, and this was the one thing

amongst other modest successes that still hung heavily upon Adelwyn’s heart. On days like this when the children of the city were playing in the streets, he wished he could turn all his will and strength toward providing for his family. He knew he could not have, but alas, it was not within his power.

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Within the folds of his waistcoat Adelwyn felt the weight of a small flask purchased not half an hour before from a medicine merchant. It was not like him or his shrewdness to spend their hard-earned money on such things, but in this year he had turned to the hope even in lingering Magickate wisdom to find a cure for his wife's barrenness and had begun to research and try a variety of herbs, balms, and infusions. He hoped that one... just one would help in bringing them a child.

Drawing in the crisp autumn air and letting it out with a sigh, Adelwyn angled his cart along the paved stone toward the little bakery where Jerusha would be standing in the doorway happily waiting for him.

The rest of the day passed with little incident for the sentries on the walls and ramparts above. As expected, the marketplace was full of noise and commotion: one cartload of turnips and blue radishes was overturned during an argument between a foreign merchant and Rosy Wyldside, a hot-tempered farmer from down along the Furrows. The Philosophers jabbered on as usual, and Tolka was content to have sold his inventory earlier than expected so that he was able to stop for a drink at the Devil's Horn, a tavern near the city gates convenient to all travelers. Here, there was always a glut of foreigners for Tolka to strike up conversations with, for the old farmer was always curious as to the goings-on in the farther reaches of the princedom. He had soon nestled himself into a cozy corner with two tinkers from beyond the hills with a generous draught of firesteed ale in hand for a bit of news and gossip before his return to country stead and family.

The day turned over to dusk, with fiery tendrils of the twin setting suns licking at the horizon. Adelwyn Ganderbout stood at the door of his bakery, shivering and drawing his waistcoat a bit tighter about him. Smoke was curling from chimneys into the clear sky above as stars began to appear, and smoke was curling as well from the elongated pipes of wizened men in door frames who stood gabbling about the days that were, when the land was little more than heaps of earth and shanties, or whatever else their old minds lighted upon. As the sounds of night cried out

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